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Degrees of Acceptance: Variation in Public Attitudes toward Segments of the LGBT Community

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Abstract

The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community includes a diverse set of groups, including distinct groups based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity, but it is not clear whether the public makes distinctions in their attitudes toward these subgroups. If they do, what factors motivate individuals to evaluate gays and lesbians differently from transgender people? This study analyzes Americans' attitudes toward these communities, and it evaluates their support for nondiscrimination protections. We find that public attitudes are significantly more negative toward transgender people and policies pertaining to them than they are toward gay men and lesbians and related policies. The analyses reveal that differences in these attitudes are associated with social contact effects, variation in cognitive consistency, elite cues, and the varying magnitudes of key political factors, such as religiosity and partisanship.

Keywords

transgender, LGBT, public opinion, interpersonal contact, group affect

American attitudes toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) rights often favor legal equality, and surveys indicate that those opinions have generally moved in a pro-LGBT direction in recent years, following a string of policy successes at the state and national levels (Baunach 2012; Flores and Barclay 2016; Kreitzer, Hamilton, and Tolbert 2014). For example, support for same-sex marriage increased in the past decade from 27 percent to 60 percent (Gallup 2016), and 69 percent of Americans support a federal nondiscrimination law protecting LGBT people from discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations (Lorenz 2015). While these relatively high-polling numbers suggest broad support for LGBT rights, it is important to recognize that the LGBT community includes a diverse set of groups, including those based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity. It is not clear from current research whether positive public sentiment applies equally to the various groups under the LGBT umbrella. Most of the public and scholarly attention to the LGBT movement centers on sexual orientation and, most recently, the issue of same-sex marriage (Tadlock and Taylor 2017), but far less attention has been paid to issues related to gender identity and the transgender community. Thus, it is difficult to ascertain whether high levels of support for nondiscrimination policies covering sexual orientation will translate to new policies that provide protections based on gender identity. If the public views the various subgroups of the LGBT community differently, this has important implications for politics of LGBT rights.

This gap in our understanding about the different groups under the LGBT umbrella prompts two research questions: do Americans distinguish in their attitudes between different segments of the LGBT community, specifically between sexual orientation and gender identity? And if so, what factors drive individuals to evaluate gays and lesbians differently from transgender people?[1] Understanding any potential attitudinal differences held by the public may have important implications given the salience of LGBT rights in our politics and the increasing prominence of transgender rights in policymaking (e.g., Taylor and Haider-Markel 2014).

We examine these questions with analyses of a nationally representative survey on attitudes toward the LGBT

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community, with a specific focus on transgender people. We first assess whether there is a gap in peoples' feelings toward gays and lesbians, on one hand, and transgender people, on the other hand. Our analysis finds that attitudes toward sexual orientation minorities are significantly more positive than attitudes toward transgender people. We then assess four potential factors that may explain the gap between attitudes toward gay men and lesbians and transgender people: asymmetric interpersonal contact, cognitive consistency, elite cues, and variation in the magnitude of the determinants of attitudes toward groups. Last, we examine public support for specific LGBT rights policies and the factors that drive differences across the two groups. In all, the analyses highlight key differences in the ways in which Americans evaluate these two subgroups of the LGBT community.

Public Opinion toward the LGBT Community

The extensive existing literature on public opinion toward the LGBT community primarily focuses on attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. This literature has explored the effects of race (Lewis 2003), gender (Herek 2002), partisanship (Brewer 2003; Garretson 2014), religion (Olson, Cadge, and Harrison 2006), attributions for homosexuality (Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2005, 2008; Lewis 2009), and interpersonal contact (Bramlett 2012; Flores 2014; Garner 2013; Herek and Capitanio 1996; Herek and Glunt 1993; Lewis 2011; Skipworth, Garner, and Dettrey 2010). Interestingly, Herek (2002) found that the public held different attitudes about gay men and lesbian women. Overall, attitudes toward gay men were more negative than attitudes toward lesbians, likely reflecting societal gender and sexuality stereotypes. Furthermore, the study found significant differences in attitudes across the gender of respondents, with heterosexual men generally holding more negative attitudes than heterosexual women. These findings suggest that gender and gender stereotypes shape attitudes toward gay men and lesbians in ways that are also likely to produce differences in attitudes toward transgender people relative to other subgroups of the LGBT community.

Yet, studies on attitudes toward the transgender community are rare and tend not to use representative national samples (Flores 2015). Norton and Herek (2013), in the earliest nationally representative studies of attitudes toward transgender people, found that those attitudes were strongly correlated with attitudes toward gays and lesbians. Furthermore, they showed that the social and psychological factors shaping attitudes toward sexual minorities—ideology, religiosity, and interpersonal contact with gay people—also affected attitudes toward transgender individuals. Subsequent studies have shown consistent evidence of the impacts of factors such as gender, authoritarianism, partisanship, ideology, and religiosity, but studies of interpersonal contact with transgender people show more mixed evidence (Flores 2015; Tadlock et al., forthcoming).

While attitudes toward transgender people seem to be correlated with attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, Norton and Herek (2013) note that attitudes toward transgender people tend to be significantly more negative. However, this difference—for example, in feeling thermometer scores reported by Norton and Herek (2013)—remains largely unexplained. If the same factors that shape attitudes toward gays and lesbians also affect attitudes toward transgender people, why is public opinion more negative toward the latter?

Asymmetric Contact

One potential factor related to this gap in attitudes is interpersonal contact. LGBT people, like many minority groups, often face social stigma and prejudice (Grant et al. 2011; Herek 2009). Interpersonal contact, however, is widely thought to mitigate these prejudicial attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Allport 1954). Knowing someone who is a member of a minority group may increase knowledge, reduce anxiety, and increase empathy toward the group (Pettigrew and Tropp 2008). These effects are well established in studies of attitudes toward sexual minorities and gay rights policies (Bramlett 2012; Garner 2013; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2008; Herek and Capitanio 1996; Lewis 2011; Skipworth, Garner, and Dettrey 2010). However, the evidence about the effect of contact with transgender individuals and attitudes is unsettled (Flores 2015; King, Winter, and Webster 2009; Tadlock et al., forthcoming). Flores (2015) did not find statistically significant effects of transgender contact on attitudes in national survey data, but analyses by Tadlock et al. (forthcoming) reveal a substantial effect. In addition, both Flores (2015) and Norton and Herek (2013) reported that contact with lesbian and gay individuals had a positive secondary transfer effect on attitudes toward transgender issues.

We expect interpersonal contact to affect attitudes toward both groups similarly, but the rates of interpersonal contact with sexual minorities and transgender people are unlikely to be equal as the transgender population is estimated to be much smaller at just 0.58 percent nationally (Flores et al. 2016).[2] Flores (2015) found that just 11 percent of respondents reported a close friend or family member who is transgender, compared with 58 percent that knew someone who was lesbian or gay.

Parasocial contact through the media may be another way that individuals become familiar with members of the LGBT community (e.g., Garretson 2015). However,

transgender people have received far less media and popular culture attention compared with gay men and lesbians. In addition, transgender people have historically been portrayed in the media in ways that arouse feelings of shock, betrayal, and titillation (MacKenzie 1994). While gay and lesbian public officials, celebrities, and fictional characters have been commonly presented in mass media in the past few decades, transgender people have only recently garnered positive national attention, with celebrities such as Laverne Cox in 2014 (*Orange Is the New Black*) and Caitlyn Jenner in 2015 (*I Am Cait*; e.g., Steinmetz 2014).

Due to the differences in public awareness and sizes of the two groups (e.g., Carpenter 2013; Meier and Labuski 2013), many people may know a sexual minority, but not a transgender person. Given this difference in contact rates, we can hypothetically divide individuals into four groups based on their contact with sexual minorities and transgender people: (1) those who have a close friend or family member who is gay or lesbian, but who do *not* know a transgender person (which we term the LG group); (2) those who do not have a close friend or family member from either group (no contact group); (3) those who have a close friend or family member who is gay or lesbian, *and* one who is transgender (LGT group); and (4) a likely small percentage of the population (Flores 2015) who have a close friend or family member who is transgender, but not one who is gay or lesbian (T group). Based on our discussion above, we posit the following hypotheses regarding these four groups:

Hypothesis 1 (H1): LG contact will lead to relatively more positive attitudes toward sexual minorities, increasing differences in attitudes toward the two groups.
Hypothesis 2 (H2): LGT contact will lead to more positive attitudes toward both groups, resulting in no effect on the differences in attitudes toward the two groups.
Hypothesis 3 (H3): T contact will lead to relatively more positive attitudes toward transgender people, increasing differences in attitudes toward the two groups.

Cognitive Consistency

Another potential explanation of the gap in evaluations of sexual minorities and transgender people focuses on concepts related to cognitive consistency. Some individuals are attitudinally constrained by cognitive structures or belief systems, such as ideology and religiosity (Converse 1964; Peffley and Hurwitz 1985; Wilcox 1990). These cognitive structures often incorporate abstract concepts, such as principles or broad beliefs, which individuals apply across a range of issues to produce a seemingly consistent set of attitudes (Campbell et al. 1960; Luskin 1987). Similarly, political sophistication can foster consistency across attitudes, especially within specific issue domains (Goren 2004; Jennings 1992; Jewitt and Goren 2016).

The concepts related to cognitive consistency, such as attitudinal constraint (Converse 1964), are likely relevant to attitudes toward transgender people because these debates represent a relatively new issue area compared with sexual orientation issues, which occupy a similar issue domain. Given the relative novelty of transgender issues, many individuals may face difficulty applying their belief systems to this issue area in a consistent way, especially those with weaker cognitive structures and less political knowledge. Thus, stronger ideologues (H4), highly religious individuals (H5), and those with greater political knowledge (H6)—all individuals who should possess a greater capacity for cognitive consistency—should be more likely to report consistent feelings, regardless if the attitudes are negative or positive, toward groups in the LGBT community:

Hypothesis 4 (H4): Stronger ideologues will report smaller differences in attitudes than individuals who report less strong ideological orientations.
Hypothesis 5 (H5): Individuals with higher levels of religiosity will report smaller differences in attitudes than will individuals with lower levels of religiosity.
Hypothesis 6 (H6): Individuals with higher levels of political knowledge will report smaller differences in attitudes than will individuals with lower levels of political knowledge.

Elite Cues and Partisanship

A related explanation of the gap in attitudes toward transgender people and sexual minorities is that elite cues serve as sources of attitude formation and constraint. Partisan elites can offer powerful cues to mass partisans that can overwhelm other sources of information in shaping attitudes (Cohen 2003), especially for stronger partisans because they are more likely to receive and accept these signals (Layman and Carsey 2002; Zaller 1992). In an era of polarized parties, the cues can be especially important in shaping public opinion (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). While elite cues may be less influential for an informed electorate (Bullock 2011), transgender rights issues present a relatively low information policy area. As such, elite cues should be fairly influential in shaping attitudes about transgender rights. And because elites tend be highly ideological and politically sophisticated, we expect the signals they send to the public to be highly constrained, resulting in relatively consistent attitudes among strong partisans.

Although elite partisan cues should provide for consistent attitudes among partisans, partisanship is also likely to affect the tenor of attitudes toward the LGBT community as well. Not surprisingly, studies of attitudes toward gay men and lesbians show significant partisan divides, with Democrats holding more positive attitudes (Brewer 2003). Sexuality-related policies and identities have often been framed as morality issues by the Religious Right and the Republican Party (Haider-Markel and Meier 1996; Pierceson 2016), resulting in partisan effects on support for gay and lesbian candidates (Haider-Markel 2010), same-sex marriage (Barth, Overby, and Huffmon 2009; Dyck and Pearson-Merkowitz 2014; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2005), and nondiscrimination policies (Haeberle 1999). The limited research on public opinion toward transgender rights has found similar partisan effects, with Republicans holding more negative attitudes (Flores 2015; Tadlock et al., forthcoming).

Thus, we expect Democrats to hold more positive attitudes toward both subgroups of the LGBT community, and Republicans likely hold more negative attitudes. However, in terms of difference in attitudes toward different groups within the LGBT community, strong partisans from both parties are likely to show relatively more consistent attitudes, regardless of whether those attitudes are positive or negative. In other words, consistency in attitudes toward the LGBT community should be correlated with the strength of individual partisanship, representing the extent to which partisans accept cues from party elites (H7).

Hypothesis 7 (H7): Individuals that identify as strong partisans will report smaller differences in attitudes than weak partisans and independents.

Varying Determinants

Studies on public opinion toward the transgender community generally find that the factors affecting attitudes toward gay men and lesbians also apply to attitudes toward transgender people (Flores 2015; Norton and Herek 2013). Yet, it is unclear whether the sizes of these effects are equal across the two groups. The gap in evaluations may be driven by differences in the magnitudes of these effects on individual attitudes. A priori, we expect two factors to have significantly different effects on attitudes toward gay men and lesbians relative to transgender people: religiosity and partisanship.

Religiosity may have a larger effect on attitudes toward gays and lesbians than toward transgender people as religious teachings often directly address homosexuality while teachings that might pertain to transgender identities are more indirect and esoteric (Ishak and Haneef 2014). Major faith communities also have different views of transsexualism, a term referring to people who change or seek to change their bodies with medical interventions and commonly included under the umbrella term transgender. For instance, Conservative Judaism (Rabinowitz 2003) and Shia Islam (Bucar 2010) have embraced sex reassignment surgeries as treatment for gender dysphoria. The Evangelical pastor and television host Rev. Pat Robertson has stated that there is no Biblical authority to call sex reassignment surgery a sin (Brydum 2013; Robertson 2006), but other groups, such as the Roman Catholic Church, have taken the opposite stance (Bucar 2010). Regardless of the religious tradition, if religious leaders are less likely to convey clear and consistent positions on transgender people, the effect of religiosity should have a larger impact on attitudes toward gays and lesbians.

Hypothesis 8 (H8): Religiosity will have a larger effect on attitudes toward gay men and lesbians than toward transgender people.

Similarly, partisanship may have a relatively larger effect for gay men and lesbians because issues related to sexual orientation have been more prominently featured by partisan elites in recent decades (H9). Until recently, when debates over transgender access to public restrooms became increasingly salient, both major parties spent far less time addressing transgender rights issues compared with gay rights issues, such as same-sex marriage. This is evident in the two parties' national platforms (Peters 2017). The Democratic Party platforms include civil rights planks covering sexual orientation as far back as 1980. The Republican Party, meanwhile, had long included planks emphasizing traditional family values and first explicitly opposes nondiscrimination protection for "sexual preference" in 1992. Both party platforms continued to address various gay rights issues in each subsequent platform. Yet, neither party addresses transgender issues in their platforms until 2008, when the Democratic Party platform added gender identity to their civil rights plank. The term "transgender" was not included in the Democratic Party platform until 2016. The Republican Party platforms have never explicitly addressed transgender issues, only referring to restroom policies as part of their larger positions on federalism and Title IX policies in 2016.[3]

Thus, transgender rights issues may be less crystallized for the two major parties. Mansbridge (1999) has noted that the degree of crystallization in different issue areas can shape elite behavior, limiting interactions between representatives and constituents on less crystallized issues. In other words, partisan elites may not have yet staked out clear and consistent positions on transgender rights issues relative to gay rights issues, making the

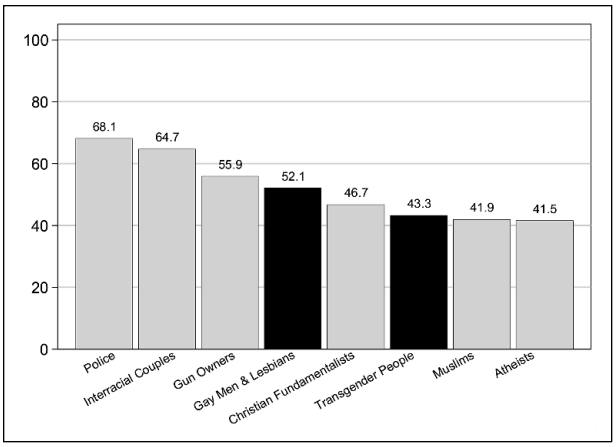

Figure 1. Average thermometer ratings of various groups.
Source. The data are from a national probability sample survey of 1,020 adults conducted for the authors by GfK from October 9 to 11, 2015.

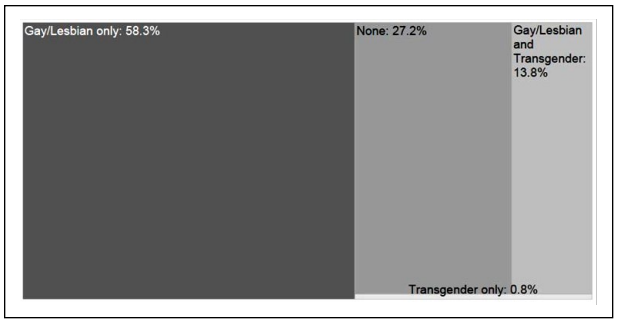

Figure 2. Distribution of LGBT contact.
Source. The data are from a national probability sample survey of 1,020 adults conducted for the authors by GfK from October 9 to 11, 2015. LGBT = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender.

observant public less certain where the parties and party elites stand.[4] As such, we expect partisanship to be more influential in shaping public opinion toward gay men and lesbians.

> **Hypothesis 9 (H9):** Partisanship will have a larger effect on attitudes toward gay men and lesbians than transgender people.

Analysis of Group Affect

To explore the differences in attitudes toward gay men and lesbians compared with attitudes toward transgender people, we analyze data from a national survey conducted for the authors via growth from knowledge (GfK's) Knowledge Panel from October 9 to 11, 2015. The survey includes 1,020 respondents over age eighteen drawn from a probability sample using address-based sampling. To ensure national representativeness, analyses employ nonresponse weights accounting for age, sex, education, race, household income, Internet status, and geographic region.[5] All questions used in this analysis are presented in the online appendix. Survey questions were constructed by adapting questions, when possible, from the General Social Survey (GSS), American National Election Studies (ANES), and a Public Religion Research Institute (2011) survey. The survey also includes a number of comparable questions about attitudes toward gay men and lesbians.

We begin by analyzing group affect using feeling thermometer ratings that range from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating warmer feelings.[6] As seen in Figure 1, the average rating of gay men and lesbians is 52.1 points, on the warmer side of the scale. By comparison, the average rating of transgender people is 43.3 points, significantly cooler and nearly 9 points lower ($p < .001$). To put these ratings in context, evaluations of gays and lesbians are comparable with ratings of gun owners while ratings of transgender people are roughly the same as evaluations of Muslims and Atheists. Consistent with Norton and Herek (2013), the survey shows that many Americans distinguish among the subgroups in the LGBT community, holding more negative feelings toward transgender people compared with gays and lesbians.

To explore the correlates of this gap in group affect, we analyze the difference in individuals' thermometer ratings of LGBT subgroups (gay men and lesbians rating minus transgender people rating), with positive values indicating relatively warmer feelings toward gays and lesbians. While a majority of the respondents gave fairly consistent ratings to both groups (i.e., differences <5 thermometer points), nearly 40 percent gave transgender people lower thermometer ratings than gay men and lesbians. Less than 5 percent gave transgender people higher ratings than gay men and lesbians. The average difference in thermometer ratings is 9.4 points, but this gap grows to 27.6 points among respondents that rate gay men and lesbians warmer than transgender people. These differences in thermometer ratings are modeled as a function of a set of independent variables, including those that test asymmetric contact, cognitive consistency, and elite cues.

The asymmetric contact argument is tested with a series of dichotomous variables indicating one of the following personal contact categories: only gay/lesbian contact (LG), gay/lesbian *and* transgender contact (LGT), or only transgender contact (T); no LGBT contact is the reference group. Respondents were separately asked whether they personally knew a family member, friend, or acquaintance (such as a coworker or someone from school or college) who is gay/lesbian or transgender. The response distribution across these categories, as depicted in Figure 2, supports the potential for asymmetric contact effects as the LG group is the modal contact category, by

a large margin. Conversely, among those that do know a transgender person, nearly all of them also know a gay or lesbian person.

The cognitive consistency argument is tested with an ideological extremity variable and a religiosity variable. Ideological extremity is constructed by folding the 7-point ideological identification variable so that 0 = *middle of the road moderates* and 3 = *extremely liberal or conservative*. Because extreme ideologues should display more attitudinal constraint, we expect that both extreme liberals and extreme conservatives would be more consistent in their evaluations of the LGBT community compared with less ideological respondents. We also test this argument using religiosity, as measured by the frequency of religious attendance ranging across a 6-point scale from "*never*" to "*more than once a week*."[7] To control for differences in attendance related to religious affiliation as well as attitudinal difference across different religious traditions, the analyses also include a set of religious affiliation indicators, including Evangelical/Protestant Christians, Other Christians, and Non-Christian Religions (the reference category is nonreligious respondents).[8]

The analyses also include a measure of political knowledge derived from an additive index of correct answers to four questions about prominent politicians and their offices. More politically knowledgeable respondents are likely to be more politically engaged and exercise attitudinal constraint, expressing more consistent evaluations of groups in the LGBT community.[9]

The effects of elite cues are examined with measures of partisan strength and political knowledge. Partisan strength is constructed by folding a 7-point partisan identification variable so that 0 = *pure independents* and 3 = *strong partisans*, either Democratic or Republican. Strong partisans tend to be more aware of elite cues and, thus, more likely to report consistent attitudes based on those cues. We also include the unfolded partisan identification variable to account for any differences between the parties in their messaging on LGBT issues.[10] The models also include control variables for education, income, age, gender, race, and sexual orientation.

Regression Analysis of the Differences in Feeling Thermometer Ratings

The results from this first analysis are presented in Table 1. The model is estimated using weighted least squares regression with robust standard errors.[11] The contact coefficients are consistent with the asymmetric contact argument. Compared with not knowing anyone from the LGBT community, LG contact increases the difference in thermometer ratings by more than 6 points (H1). For these individuals—the largest category of respondents—personal contact with only gay people is associated with significantly warmer feelings toward gays and lesbians compared with transgender people. Yet, if the respondent knows people from both groups, the gap is no larger than those that have no contact and is indistinguishable from 0 (H2). Finally, for those very few respondents who know a transgender person but not a gay person, this personal contact reduces the gap in thermometer ratings by roughly 7 points compared with respondents who do not know anyone from the LGBT community (H3). However, with only ten respondents falling in this category, this negative effect is swamped in the aggregate ratings by the positive coefficient of the LG contact group. Overall, the asymmetric contact pattern seen in Figure 2 produces relatively warmer affect for gay men and lesbian women compared with transgender people.

Two of the three variables testing the cognitive consistency argument are statistically significant in the expected direction. Ideological extremity is associated with smaller differences in thermometer ratings, meaning that respondents rate gay and transgender individuals more similarly (H4). Compared with ideological moderates, the ratings gap is more than 4 points less for extreme ideologues. Religiosity has an even larger effect (H5). The difference in ratings for the most frequent attendees of religious

Table 1. Differences in Thermometer Ratings of Gays and Lesbians and Transgender People.

	b_i	SE_b
Gay/lesbian contact	5.705***	1.718
Gay/lesbian and transgender contact	0.062	2.029
Transgender contact	−7.806***	2.096
Ideological extremity	−1.485†	0.755
Religious attendance	−1.523**	0.583
Partisan strength	0.210	0.818
Political knowledge	0.189	0.521
Party ID (R→D)	−1.325***	0.426
Evangelical/Protestant	4.745	2.890
Other Christian religion	3.067	2.737
Non-Christian religion	0.552	2.648
Education	0.948	0.805
Income	0.337†	0.186
Age	0.008	0.045
Female	−2.991†	1.642
Nonwhite	−1.448	1.898
LGB	3.212	3.341
Constant	7.295†	5.041
R^2	.072	
N	924	

Dependent variable is the difference between thermometer ratings of gays/lesbians and transgender people; robust standard errors in parentheses; the data are from a national probability sample survey of 1,020 adults conducted for the authors by GfK from October 9 to 11, 2015. LGB = lesbian, gay, bisexual.
†$p < .1$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$; two-tailed tests.

Table 2. SUR Model of Thermometer Ratings.

	Gays and lesbians		Transgender people	
	b_i	SE_b	b_i	SE_b
Group contact	9.136***	1.470	9.146***	1.816
Ideology (L→C)	−5.063***	0.793	−4.534***	0.820
Party ID (R→D)	**1.254***	**0.585**	**2.538*****	**0.602**
Political knowledge	1.494*	0.653	1.744**	0.669
Religious attendance	**−3.194*****	**0.619**	**−1.878****	**0.637**
Evangelical/Protestant	**−1.555**	**2.763**	**−5.352**†	**2.847**
Other Christian religion	−4.850†	2.832	−7.916**	2.916
Non-Christian religion	1.655	4.045	1.549	4.165
Education	3.844***	1.005	3.248**	1.035
Income	**0.955*****	**0.242**	**0.647****	**0.249**
Age	−0.126*	0.058	−0.169**	0.060
Female	**8.126*****	**1.868**	**11.120*****	**1.915**
Nonwhite	−3.667†	2.218	−2.674	2.283
LGB	4.244	3.047	1.776	3.128
Constant	49.499***	6.599	43.261***	6.772
R^2	.308		.295	
N	924		924	

Results of SUR; dependent variables are thermometer ratings of gays/lesbians and transgender people; statistically significant differences in row coefficients listed in bold (χ^2 tests, $p < .1$); the data are from a national probability sample survey of 1,020 adults conducted for the authors by GfK from October 9 to 11, 2015. SUR = Seeming Unrelated Regression; LGB = lesbian, gay, bisexual.
†$p < .1$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$; two-tailed tests.

services is more than 7 points less than those that never attend services. Meanwhile, political knowledge is not significantly associated with differences in thermometer ratings, so H6 is not supported.

The partisan strength variable is not statistically significant (H7). However, elite cues may still play a role, as partisanship shows a directional effect. That is, Democrats tend to have smaller differences in these ratings, while Republicans express larger differences. However, if either of the parties is not communicating clear positions on transgender issues, partisanship would not be constraining for those partisans. The pattern in this analysis suggests that Democrats may offer a clearer position on transgender issues, resulting in a directional partisan effect. Alternatively, this pattern is consistent with increasingly positive attitudes toward gay men and lesbians in both parties, but still relatively cool attitudes toward transgender people among Republicans. As noted earlier, interactions with political knowledge and education do not change these results.

Seemingly Unrelated Regression Analysis of Feeling Thermometer Ratings

To test the varying determinants argument, we estimate separate models of thermometer ratings of gay and transgender people and compare the coefficients across the equations.[12] Because the two equations are not likely to be independent of one another, it is more efficient to estimate them simultaneously, using Seeming Unrelated Regression (SUR) analysis (Zellner and Theil 1962). This approach not only improves the efficiency of the estimates by allowing for correlated errors across the equations, but also allows for direct statistical tests of the coefficients across the equations. Thus, we estimate both equations using SUR and subsequently perform chi-square tests of the equality of coefficients between the two equations. The models include roughly the same set of variables used in the previous models, with two exceptions: first, for each equation, the interpersonal contact variable indicates whether the respondent knows someone from the subgroup that is being evaluated in that model (gay/lesbian or transgender person). Next, partisan strength is not included as the dependent variables measure affect rather than differences in affect.

Table 2 presents the results from the SUR analysis. Significant differences in coefficients between the two equations are presented in bold font. While the coefficients in the equations are consistent in their direction and level of statistical significance, the chi-square tests reveal significant differences in the magnitudes of the effects of four variables, including partisanship and religiosity. First, the effect of partisanship is more than twice as large for thermometer ratings of transgender people. This is surprising, given the previous discussion of partisanship

and elite cues. However, with the dramatic increase in public support for gay rights in recent years, partisan differences may be starker on transgender issues today than on issues related to sexual orientation. Conversely, the effect of religious attendance is nearly twice as large for thermometer ratings of gay and lesbian people compared with transgender people. This is consistent with the argument that homosexuality is more frequently discussed in religious services and more accessible to respondents in shaping their feelings toward the two groups.

The chi-square tests also reveal three additional factors that have varying magnitudes across the groups. Evangelical/Protestant Christians rate both groups lower than nonreligious respondents, but these religious affiliations have a significantly larger impact on ratings of transgender people. Gender also shows a larger impact on feelings toward transgender people than feelings toward gays and lesbians. Although women tend to have more positive attitudes toward both groups, the effect for the transgender thermometer rating is nearly 3 points larger. Meanwhile, income has a larger effect on thermometer ratings of gays and lesbians, showing that higher income individuals hold relatively more positive attitudes toward gay individuals compared with transgender people. The income variable ranges from 1 to 19, so the difference in thermometer ratings for the highest income category is estimated to be nearly 6 points.

Analysis of Policy Attitudes

So far, the analyses have identified significant differences in Americans' general feelings toward transgender people relative to gay men and lesbians, and factors that related to these differences, but they do not address how these attitudes relate to policy attitudes. Are the differences evident in group affect reflected in attitudes toward comparable public policies affecting the two groups?

Although not every LGBT-oriented policy is pertinent to both groups, several public policies can address both sexual orientation and gender identity. Respondents were asked about four such public policies that could include both sexual orientation and gender identity: protection against discrimination in employment, barring discrimination in public accommodations, antibullying measures in schools, and the right for businesses to refuse services to people based on religious beliefs.[13] Respondents were asked to indicate how much they agree or disagree with each policy. The only difference in wording was whether the policy was oriented toward gay men and lesbians or transgender people (see online appendix). Responses were coded from −2 to 2, with higher scores indicating support for LGBT protections.

Figure 3 shows the mean response to these policy questions. For each of the policies, the average score is positive, indicating fairly broad support for these policies. The level of support does vary across the policies, with greater support for antibullying policies and the lowest support for policies denying the right of businesses to refuse service based on religious beliefs. Interestingly, the differences in support for these policies between the two groups also vary. Both nondiscrimination policies show significantly lower mean levels of support for protections based on gender identity ($p < .01$), but the differences for antibullying and religious refusal are not statistically significant. These results may reflect a generalized support for antibullying policies and attitudes toward religious freedoms regardless of the groups they protect. Yet, Americans do differentiate to some degree between the two groups for nondiscrimination protections, displaying higher support for the inclusion of sexual orientation as a protected class relative to gender identity.

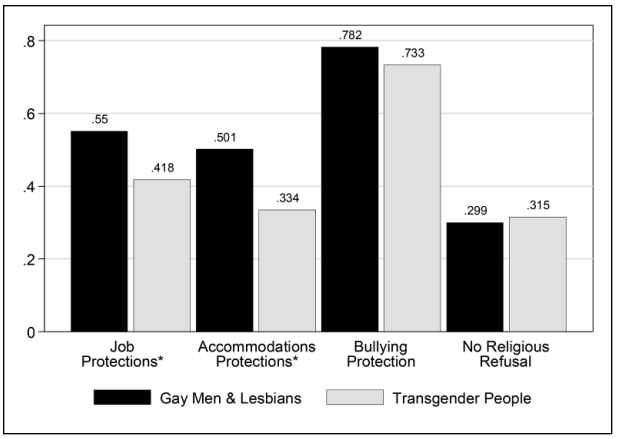

Figure 3. Mean level of support for LGBT protections.
Source. The data are from a national probability sample survey of 1,020 adults conducted for the authors by GfK from October 9 to 11, 2015. LGBT = lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender.
*$p < .01$; two-tailed difference of means test.

Differences in Support for Nondiscrimination Policies

We turn our attention to analyzing the factors that explain these differences in levels of support for nondiscrimination policies due to their differences. Following the hypotheses and analyses of group affect, we begin by modeling individual differences in support for job and public accommodations discrimination protections (gay men and lesbians minus transgender people) as a function of the set of independent variables described earlier. The differences in support for nondiscrimination policies range from −4 (*strongly oppose protections for gay men and lesbians and strongly support protections for transgender people*) to 4 (*strongly support protections for gay*

Table 3. Differences in Support for Nondiscrimination Policies.

	Jobs				Public accommodations			
	b_i	SE_b	b_i	SE_b	b_i	SE_b	b_i	SE_b
Thermometer rating difference	—	—	0.007***	0.002	—	—	0.005**	0.002
Gay/lesbian contact	0.096	0.073	0.013	0.070	0.061	0.068	0.029	0.070
Gay/lesbian and transgender contact	0.245*	0.106	0.197*	0.096	0.275*	0.106	0.194†	0.100
Transgender contact	−0.530†	0.294	−0.512†	0.295	0.047	0.144	0.080	0.141
Ideological extremity	−0.001	0.033	−0.014	0.031	−0.068*	0.033	−0.068*	0.033
Religious attendance	−0.007	0.024	0.000	0.023	−0.021	0.021	−0.025	0.020
Political knowledge	−0.025	0.025	−0.017	0.023	0.013	0.020	0.008	0.020
Partisan strength	−0.052	0.038	−0.048	0.038	0.005	0.035	0.006	0.034
Party ID (R→D)	0.017	0.019	0.017	0.018	−0.026	0.016	−0.017	0.016
Evangelical/Protestant	0.053	0.102	−0.020	0.087	0.100	0.083	0.140†	0.080
Other Christian religion	0.045	0.097	−0.010	0.084	0.115	0.083	0.162*	0.080
Non-Christian religion	−0.141	0.136	−0.176	0.131	−0.123	0.127	−0.069	0.129
Education	0.032	0.035	0.024	0.033	0.019	0.031	0.040	0.029
Income	−0.001	0.007	−0.002	0.007	0.003	0.007	0.000	0.008
Age	0.003	0.002	0.004†	0.002	0.000	0.002	0.001	0.002
Female	−0.133*	0.064	−0.117†	0.061	−0.071	0.056	−0.063	0.056
Nonwhite	−0.210*	0.087	−0.141†	0.080	0.057	0.066	0.026	0.063
LGB	0.196†	0.105	0.120	0.085	0.162†	0.090	0.169*	0.080
Constant	0.037	0.162	0.023	0.154	0.149	0.155	0.039	0.154
R^2	.043		.071		.032		.052	
N	938		916		941		919	

Dependent variables are the individual differences in levels of support for jobs or public accommodations protections for gays/lesbians and transgender people; robust standard errors in parentheses; the data are from a national probability sample survey of 1,020 adults conducted for the authors by GfK from October 9 to 11, 2015; LGB = lesbian, gay, bisexual.
†$p < .1$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$; two-tailed tests.

men and lesbians and strongly oppose protections for transgender people). With an average score of 0.134 for jobs protections and 0.167 for public accommodations protections, this variable reflects that the public is slightly more supportive of protections for gay men and lesbians ($p < .01$). We also estimate models that include differences in group thermometer ratings as independent variables.

Table 3 presents the results from these regression models.[14] For these policy attitudes, very few of the hypothesized factors explain the differences in levels of support for nondiscrimination policies. One significant effect we find is interpersonal contact. Knowing someone who is transgender decreases the relative difference in support for job protections, but, surprisingly, contact with both groups increases the differences for both jobs and public accommodations protections. This result suggests that the effect of contact may be stronger for policy attitudes related to sexual orientation. The finding may reflect the public's familiarity with gay rights issues relative to transgender rights issues.

The other statistically significant effects are not consistent across the two policy attitudes. For job protections, gender, race, and sexuality all affect differences in support for these policies, with women and racial minorities expressing smaller differences in support, and sexual minorities expressing larger differences on average. For public accommodations policy, ideologues are more likely to express consistent levels of support across the two groups. While religious attendance does not significantly affect differences in support for this policy, religious affiliation is a statistically significant factor, once the effect of group affect is controlled for. Christian adherents tend to report larger differences than nonreligious. In addition, gay, lesbian, and bisexual respondents in both model specifications report larger gaps in support for nondiscrimination policies, favoring protections for gays and lesbians.

Although most of the variables directly testing our hypotheses are not statistically significant, the thermometer rating differences do show significant effects on support for nondiscrimination policy. Furthermore, the thermometer gaps have the largest standardized coefficients in the models. It follows that the large and significant differences seen in analyses of group affect have important implications for policy attitudes. Asymmetric contact, religiosity, ideological extremity, and partisanship may not directly affect differences in policy attitudes,

Table 4. SUR Models of Support for Job Discrimination Protections.

	Gays and lesbians		Transgender people		Gays and lesbians		Transgender people	
	b_i	SE_b	b_i	SE_b	b_i	SE_b	b_i	SE_b
Thermometer rating	—	—	—	—	0.012***	0.001	0.011***	0.001
Group contact	**0.296*** **	**0.059**	**0.106**	**0.070**	0.149*	0.060	0.019	0.069
Ideology (L→C)	−0.207***	0.028	−0.221***	0.028	−0.145***	0.027	−0.167***	0.027
Party ID (R→D)	0.104***	0.021	0.101***	0.020	0.088***	0.020	0.079***	0.019
Political knowledge	0.020	0.023	0.046*	0.023	0.006	0.022	0.028	0.021
Religious attendance	−0.070**	0.022	−0.046*	0.022	−0.041†	0.021	−0.032	0.020
Evangelical/Protestant	−0.061	0.098	−0.052	0.097	−0.041	0.092	0.009	0.091
Other Christian religion	−0.033	0.100	−0.027	0.099	0.054	0.095	0.094	0.093
Non-Christian religion	0.235	0.144	0.307*	0.143	0.236†	0.135	0.310*	0.132
Education	0.123**	0.036	0.099**	0.036	0.081*	0.034	0.064†	0.033
Income	−0.010	0.009	−0.006	0.009	−0.024**	0.008	−0.017*	0.008
Age	**−0.002**	**0.002**	**−0.006** **	**0.002**	**0.000**	**0.002**	**−0.004***	**0.002**
Female	**0.148***	**0.067**	**0.272*** **	**0.066**	**0.063**	**0.063**	**0.175** **	**0.062**
Nonwhite	**−0.173***	**0.079**	**−0.030**	**0.078**	−0.125†	0.074	−0.022	0.073
LGB	0.146	0.108	0.062	0.107	0.110	0.102	0.073	0.100
Constant	0.792***	0.231	0.892***	0.228	0.214	0.214	0.414†	0.220
R^2	.292		.288		.404		.404	
N	938		938		916		916	

Results of SUR; dependent variables are the levels of support for jobs protections for gays/lesbians and transgender people; statistically significant differences in row coefficients listed in bold (χ^2 tests, $p < .1$); the data are from a national probability sample survey of 1,020 adults conducted for the authors by GfK from October 9 to 11, 2015. SUR = Seeming Unrelated Regression; LGB = lesbian, gay, bisexual.
†$p < .1$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$; two-tailed tests.

but by shaping differences in general feelings toward the groups, these factors do show an *indirect* effect.

SUR Analysis of Support for Nondiscrimination Policies

To assess the varying determinants argument (H8 and H9) in the context of policy attitudes, we conducted another set of SUR analyses. Like the previous regression models of differences in support for nondiscrimination policies, we present specifications both with and without group feeling thermometer ratings as independent variables.[15]

Tables 4 and 5 present the results for attitudes toward job and public accommodations discrimination protections, respectively. Several differences across the groups are apparent. Unlike the SUR models of group affect, the contact variables show different effects for both types of nondiscrimination policies. Interpersonal contact shows significant positive effects on attitudes toward nondiscrimination policies for gay men and lesbians, but not for transgender people. This difference is slightly attenuated when group affect is controlled for and does not quite reach traditional levels of statistical significance, with p values of .14 and .11 for jobs protections and public accommodations protections, respectively. However, the pattern of a significant effect for gays and lesbians but not for transgender people remains. This suggests that differences in levels of support for job protection policies are not just driven by asymmetric contact effects, but are actually exacerbated because contact effects for transgender people do not seem to extend to policy attitudes.

Unlike the thermometer ratings models, religious attendance does not show significantly different effects on policy attitudes. However, in all of the four models, the magnitude of the religious attendance coefficient is larger for gay men and lesbians, with chi-square tests producing p values between roughly 0.1 and 0.3. The large standard errors for the religious attendance coefficient in the transgender protections equations make it very difficult to reject the null hypothesis that the two coefficients are equal, but the models nonetheless may suggest substantively different effects.

The models of support for job discrimination protections also show significant differences in the effects of demographic variables. Age has a significant negative impact on levels of support for transgender protections, but not for gay and lesbian protections. Racial minorities, meanwhile, have lower levels of support for sexual orientation protections, but not for transgender protections. Gender has a significantly larger effect for transgender protections.

Table 5. SUR Models of Support for Public Accommodations Discrimination Protections.

	Gays and lesbians		Transgender people		Gays and lesbians		Transgender people	
	b_i	SE_b	b_i	SE_b	b_i	SE_b	b_i	SE_b
Thermometer rating	—	—	—	—	0.011***	0.001	0.011***	0.001
Group contact	**0.268*** **	**0.057**	**0.064**	**0.070**	0.153**	0.058	0.013	0.069
Ideology (L→C)	−0.221***	0.028	−0.198***	0.028	−0.168***	0.027	−0.145***	0.027
Party ID (R→D)	**0.094*** **	**0.020**	**0.126*** **	**0.021**	0.078***	0.020	0.099***	0.020
Political knowledge	0.035	0.023	0.038	0.023	0.022	0.022	0.022	0.022
Religious attendance	−0.076***	0.022	−0.055*	0.022	−0.052*	0.021	−0.037†	0.021
Evangelical/Protestant	0.007	0.098	−0.104	0.100	0.050	0.092	−0.061	0.094
Other Christian religion	0.052	0.100	−0.055	0.102	0.150	0.095	0.042	0.096
Non-Christian religion	0.157	0.144	0.230	0.146	0.172	0.135	0.214	0.136
Education	0.141***	0.036	0.108**	0.036	0.106**	0.034	0.064†	0.034
Income	−0.007	0.009	−0.009	0.009	−0.021*	0.008	−0.019*	0.008
Age	−0.002	0.002	−0.002	0.002	0.000	0.002	−0.001	0.002
Female	0.183**	0.066	0.260***	0.067	0.106†	0.063	0.154*	0.064
Nonwhite	−0.060	0.078	−0.126	0.080	−0.024	0.074	−0.081	0.075
LGB	0.162	0.108	0.039	0.109	0.140	0.102	0.031	0.103
Constant	0.670**	0.231	0.603*	0.233	0.149	0.226	0.157	0.226
R^2	.294		.276		.405		.389	
N	941		941		919		919	

Results of SUR; dependent variables are the levels of support for jobs protections for gays/lesbians and transgender people; statistically significant differences in row coefficients listed in bold (χ^2 tests, $p < .1$); the data are from a national probability sample survey of 1,020 adults conducted for the authors by GfK from October 9 to 11, 2015. SUR = Seeming Unrelated Regression; LGB = lesbian, gay, bisexual.
†$p < .1$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$; two-tailed tests.

The first model of support for public accommodations protections shows significant difference in the effects of group contact and partisan identification. However, these differences recede once the group thermometer ratings are included in the equations. As in the Table 3 analyses, general feelings toward the two groups seem to be at the root of the expressed differences in policy attitudes. There is little variation in the direct effects of most of these factors (with the exception of the effects of demographics in the jobs protection models), but rather the varying determinants indirectly contribute to different levels of support for these nondiscrimination policies.

Discussion

Despite the closely affiliated political advocacy coalition shared by gay and lesbian people and transgender individuals, many Americans do make distinctions between the two groups in their attitudes. Respondents in our survey, on average, expressed warmer feelings toward gays and lesbians compared with transgender people. Furthermore, the public is less likely to support discrimination protections for transgender people in comparison with gay men and lesbians. In examining the potential correlates of these differences in opinions toward groups within the LGBT community, we find support for several explanations. First, personal contact had a significant impact on thermometer ratings toward both groups, but respondents were much more likely to report knowing gay men and lesbians. The result is that personal contact seems to have an asymmetric effect on attitudes, contributing to gaps in feelings toward the groups. With just 0.58 percent of adults in the United States identifying as transgender (Flores et al. 2016), the likelihood of personal contact is relatively small and presents a hurdle for LGBT rights activists advocating for transgender rights. Exacerbating this asymmetric pattern, the positive effects of interpersonal contact did not extend to support for transgender discrimination protections. These findings not only highlight the importance of increasing the visibility of the transgender community, but also in directly connecting this visibility to advocacy for nondiscrimination policies.

Next, variables related to cognitive consistency were important determinants of differences in attitudes. Ideologues at either end of the political spectrum showed more attitudinal consistency across the groups than moderates, and the most religious respondents also reported more consistent attitudes. Importantly, most people are neither highly religious nor ideological, suggesting there is a need for public education to positively affect attitudes toward transgender people and raise support for transgender rights

to the higher levels enjoyed by gay rights policies. In addition, the relatively small effect of religiosity on feelings toward the transgender community suggests that opposition to transgender rights may not be as powerfully connected to religious beliefs as was the case with gay rights.

Elite party cues did not seem to provide attitudinal consistency across the two subgroups. Instead, partisanship showed directional effects: Democrats are more likely to hold consistent attitudes while Republicans tend to hold relatively more negative attitudes toward transgender people and rights. The relatively polarized nature of these issues across the two parties certainly poses a challenge for transgender rights advocates.

Our findings also explain, in part, why groups opposed to LGBT rights have focused their attacks on the transgender community. Not only do transgender people and transgender rights have lower levels of support than gay people and gay rights, but the lack of cognitive consistency for nonideologues on these issues leaves the transgender community vulnerable to "crafted talk" (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000) that undercuts support for transgender rights. This suggests that efforts by LGBT rights activists to strengthen the relationship between gay and transgender rights in the public consciousness would increase public support for transgender rights.

Overall, the study highlights not only the distinctions Americans make in considering transgender people relative to gays and lesbians, but also the differences in the factors that shape these attitudes. As transgender issues increasingly become salient in the American political system, scholars should bear in mind the similarities and differences between these subgroups. Public opinion toward the two groups, while certainly related, shows distinct patterns that need to be accounted for in the scholarly literature. Furthermore, our findings underscore the challenges faced by transgender rights advocates. While attitudes toward gays and lesbians have become increasingly positive in recent years, feelings toward transgender people remain cooler. Personal contact has contributed to changing attitudes toward gay men and lesbians, but our analysis suggests that it may not be as powerful a force for the transgender community. We believe that advocates for transgender equality will need to grapple with these factors to achieve their policy goals.

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Notes

1. Given data limitations, our analysis unfortunately excludes bisexuals. We encourage other scholars to investigate this issue.
2. The Williams Institute estimates of the transgender population show little variation across states, ranging from 0.3 percent in North Dakota to 0.78 percent in Hawaii (Flores et al. 2016).
3. The polling data used in this study were collected in October 2015, prior to the writing of the 2016 party platforms.
4. Again, our data were collected in October 2015. This was prior to the forceful public actions and statements by the Obama Administration in response to North Carolina's well-publicized HB2 law (passed in 2016) that targeted bathroom access by transgender people.
5. Respondents cannot opt-in to this panel. GfK provides Internet access and equipment for respondents lacking that.
6. Respondents evaluated Muslims, Christian fundamentalists, atheists, gay men and lesbians, transgender people, interracial couples, gun owners, and police as follows: "On a scale from 0-100, please indicate your feelings toward each group below. A score of 100 means that you feel very warm and positive towards the group, but a score of 0 means that you feel very cold or negative. A score of 50 indicates a neutral feeling." The order of the groups was randomized for each respondent.
7. Intermediate categories of religious service attendance include "*seldom*," "*a few times a year*," "*once or twice a month*," and "*once a week*." Alternative measures of religious service attendance produce similar results.
8. GfK asks Knowledge Panel participants, "What is your religion?" and categorizes responses into thirteen categories, including Catholic, Evangelical/Protestant Christian, Jehovah's Witness, Mormon, Jewish, Islam/Muslim, Orthodox Church, Hindu, Buddhist, Unitarian, Other Christian religion, Other non-Christian religion, No religion/not a believer/atheist/agnostic. We collapse these into four categories for the analysis. Alternative groupings of these religious affiliations do not substantively change the results.
9. Interactions between partisanship and both political knowledge and education were also included in alternative specifications to assess whether those more likely to receive partisan cues were more influenced by their partisanship, but they did not produce significant results and are not presented here.
10. Omitting either of the partisanship variables does not significantly alter the results presented here.
11. The regression analyses use sampling weights provided by GfK.
12. Alternative Seeming Unrelated Regression (SUR) models, using the ratings of these two groups relative to the mean rating of all eight groups in the survey (e.g., Wilcox, Sigelman, and Cook 1989), produce virtually identical results.
13. The order of these statements was randomized within the survey.

14. Nonlinear estimation methods, such as ordered logit, produce similar results.
15. Nonlinear estimation methods, such as seemingly unrelated ordered logit, produce similar results.

Supplemental Material

Appendix materials and replication data for this article are available with the manuscript on the *Political Research Quarterly* (PRQ) website. Please contact the lead author for replication data availability questions.

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